

Amigos Internacionales Expands Ebola Response in Congo

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Amigos Internacionales medical workers responding to Ebola crisis. (Photo/Michael Ryer)

By Kendall Lyons · Baptist Standard

Leaders of Amigos Internacionales, a Texas-based nonprofit organization, say they are racing to expand their response to an Ebola outbreak in eastern Congo. Medical workers face shortages of protective equipment, transportation, and basic supplies as they work in some of the region's most isolated communities.

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Leaders of Amigos Internacionales, a Texas-based nonprofit organization, say they are racing to expand their response to an Ebola outbreak in eastern Congo.

Medical workers face shortages of protective equipment, transportation, and basic supplies as they work in some of the region's most isolated communities.

Amigos Internacionales, a ministry founded in 1967, has spent

decades building schools, churches, water wells, and vocational programs throughout East Africa.

Expanded medical outreach

In recent years, however, the organization significantly expanded its medical outreach, performing surgeries, operating health clinics, and responding to public health emergencies across Uganda, Burundi, Tanzania, and the Democratic Republic of Congo.

Paul Mulyamboga, director of medical services for Amigos Internacionales, said the region faces healthcare, infrastructure, and roadway challenges.

"This is a region which has been forgotten by the world, primarily due to a lot of conflicts that have been happening in this place," Mulyamboga said.

Mulyamboga, a pediatric surgeon in Uganda, said the organization has become deeply involved in Ebola response efforts in eastern Congo, where years of conflict and instability have complicated government and humanitarian

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interventions.

According to Mulyamboga, more than 1,950 people have been affected by the virus, and more than 800 people have died.

Dozens of provinces remain difficult to reach because of political unrest, insecurity, and distrust among residents, he said.

"The community themselves do not believe that there is Ebola," Mulyamboga said.

"They believe it is something that foreigners are using to circle them off the rest of the world, and to take them from precious minerals."

Community-centered approach

Rather than relying solely on outside aid workers, Amigos has adopted a community-centered approach that works through local leaders and residents.

The organization coordinates surveillance efforts, contact tracing, patient isolation, and public health education while providing food, transportation, and protective equipment to volunteers and medical teams.

"Our model is working with the local community," Mulyamboga said. "We engage them fully, and that makes surveillance and contact tracing easier."

Mulyamboga said healthcare workers often reuse gloves and protective equipment because supplies are limited.

Isolation centers sometimes struggle to provide enough food and medicine, leading some patients to leave treatment facilities and return to their villages, increasing the risk of further transmission.

"Every single day, we are having more than 200 people who are

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reporting up to our centers with the disease," Mulyamboga said. "Those are 200 communities, 200 villages that we have

not yet reached.”

Growing healthcare work

Michael Ryer, president and chief executive officer of Amigos Internacionales, said the organization's healthcare work has grown rapidly in recent years.

Founded by John LaNoue, Amigos initially focused on mobile medical and dental clinics in South Texas before expanding overseas.

Today, the organization operates five schools serving more than 1,200 students, drills water wells, supports churches, and provides vocational training programs throughout East Africa.

Ryer said Amigos' healthcare expansion began after one of the organization's teachers lost her 6-year-old daughter because the family could not obtain malaria medication that cost approximately \$1 per day.

“We thought, ‘We’ve got to do something,’” Ryer said.

In recent months, Amigos and its medical partners have conducted hundreds of pediatric surgeries, including cleft palate repairs and procedures to correct congenital abnormalities.

Ryer said the organization spent approximately \$185,000 on medical programs last year and estimates that each donated dollar generated \$71 in medical services.

The organization's work extends beyond healthcare.

Kibwota Patrick, director of operations in Uganda for Amigos Internacionales, said the ministry's long-term goal is

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to create sustainable change through schools, churches, agriculture, clean water projects, and community development programs.

Patrick joined Amigos as a volunteer about 10 years ago after conducting due diligence for a potential partnership. Today, he oversees operations in Uganda and helps coordinate the organization's expansion into neighboring countries.

“My role is basically to provide that program leadership and give that direction to the program,” Patrick said.

Christ as inspiration

The organization's strategy revolves around creating “mission points,” where communities receive clean water, educational opportunities, vocational training, and healthcare services.

Programs include sewing classes, community gardens, livestock projects, and schools that produce much of their own food.

Although humanitarian work remains central to Amigos' mission, leaders emphasized that faith continues to guide their efforts.

“The mission work that we do comes directly from our biggest inspiration, and that is Jesus Christ himself,” Mulyamboga said.

“Beyond the medicine, beyond the surgery that we perform, are they able to go home with the best gift of them all—the gift of Jesus?”

According to Ryer, more than 9,000 people professed faith

through the Amigos Internacionales programs last year, and the organization hopes to reach 10,000 by the end of this year. As Amigos Internacionales expands its Ebola response, leaders say the need for financial support has become increasingly

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urgent.

"There's only one action that can change it all," Mulyamboga said. "Just getting out of your way and giving and donating anything that you're able to give to organizations like Amigos that are doing everything possible to work with these communities."

The consequences of inaction could extend far beyond central Africa, he warned.

"When this disease has been defeated, and we have victory, the rest of the world is safe," Mulyamboga said. "Unfortunately, if there is no victory in eastern Congo, the rest of the world is not safe."

Historical Authority Project

This document is preserved by Amigos Internacionales as part of the Historical Authority Project, an initiative dedicated to preserving significant milestones in the organization's humanitarian, medical, educational, and disaster relief history.

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